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ABSTRACT

Teachers should help students gain a sense of where they stand. It is difficult to imagine literature without a sense of place--places bridge time and evoke and recreate the past. To compose is to remember, to recreate, and a sense of place begins the composing. Some northwestern U.S. books illustrate the point. In a college literature class, examples of leading works by northwestern authors writing about the Northwest were presented in four categories. Under the first category, "The Western Mountain Man," the best mountain-man novel of all, A. B. Guthrie's "The Big Sky," was studied, along with Don Berry's "Trask." A second category, "Truth in Toil," addressed hardships and failure in the region. Students examined Lois Hudson's "Reapers of the Dust" and Ivan Doig's "This House of Sky." For a third category, "Death and Taxes," concerning northwestern economic warfare, James Welch's "The Death of Jim Loney," was chosen, as was "The Viewless Winds" by Murray Morgan. The fourth category, "Outside and In," dealt with how the exterior and interior worlds interact. Works examined included "Solace of Open Spaces," by Gretel Erlich and "Housekeeping" by Marilynne Robinson. In brief, the course presented a kaleidoscope of the fructifying region some people are lucky enough to call home. (SG)

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Northwest Literature and a Sense of Place

I have friends in Tacoma and Seattle who have lived here ten, twenty, thirty years and have never been to Mount Rainier. Years ago during a Fulbright year in Greece I met Athenians who had never been atop the Acropolis. Yet these same persons thought themselves Pacific Northwesterners and Greeks. Of course I'm not denying their regional identities. That's something for them to claim and feel comfortable with. Perhaps their sense of place finds roots in other ways. But it's possible they have not cultivated a feeling of place, perhaps have never thought much about it.

I have students at the University of Washington who have been to Disneyland several times but can't identify a single flowering plant on our campus or speak a knowing word about persons whose names are chiseled into the cornerstone of buildings these students enter each day. In contrast think of Walt Whitman who wrote:

> There was a child went forth every day,
> And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became,
> And that object became part of him for the day or a certain
> part of the day,
> Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.

What better reason to teach than to help students gain a sense of where they stand, the place that nurtures their imagination and joins their days with times past, a place where, as the Northwest novelist Ivan Doig says in Winter Brothers (1980), "atoms merge out of the landscape into us." For I am convinced that cultivating a sense of place contributes to one's having a sense of self. Not to have the former is to risk not having the latter.

We all know the twentieth-century terms describing this condition:

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alienation, angst, anomie. To A. Bartlett Giamatti, the late Commissioner of Major League Baseball as well as President of Yale University, home is a concept, a state of mind suggesting a mixture of memory and longing. It gives a sense of security and accessibility, an "aroma of inclusiveness." Imagine writing about baseball this way! In Giamatti's Take Time for Paradise (1989) something rings true not only about the game but all that it symbolizes. Home base, he says, "is where one first learned to be separate and it remains in the mind as the place where reunion, if it ever were to occur, would happen." Thus we have a Ricky Henderson or a Jose Canseco as a modern-day Odysseus, forever drawn to home. I like this image even though these multi-millionaires would probably wonder what the hell we're talking about. Nevertheless, the journey around the bases, says the late Commissioner, "is full of turnings, wanderings, danger." Baseball, he says, is a narrative "about separation, loss, and the hope for reunion." Imagine baseball without home base! Imagine literature without a sense of place. Even Shelley's skylark has its local habitation and his every metaphor its local point or moment.

I want to mention some Northwest books that illustrate this point. But first let me dabble in theory a little longer especially as it pertains to literature and the importance of place. I'll refer again to Ivan Doig who in addition to his several Montana novels wrote Winter Brothers in which he imagines himself the spiritual brother of James Swan, a Washington pioneer from Boston who spent fifty years in Port Townsend, dying there in 1900 but leaving behind two million words in diaries and journals, all carefully housed in the University of Washington library and searched through by Doig himself. Doig says that had he remained in Montana he would never have understood Swan. Montana was not the place to discover this new kinship,

this brotherhood: "Not winters of white steel but the coastal ones of pewter-gray, soft-toned, workable, with the uninsistent Northwest rain simply there in the air like molecules made visible." It was here he found Swan's words and his own as well. Had Doig wished to work with different words, Montana words, he would have stayed there. More to the point, the inner chambers of the Seattle writer already overflowed with Montana and he could go to them again. But in writing Winter Brothers he needed a different place to be. He needed to be here in Seattle; he needed to be over on the Olympic Peninsula; he needed to be in Port Townsend.

Place bridges time. Place evokes the past and makes possible its re-creation. To compose is to remember, to re-create, and a sense of place begins the composing. A sense of place is like home base with its own generating force, different for each of us and yet existential, crucial in our existence. This is why shamans consecrated the center pole of a teepee, for it was thought to extend out from the earth's axis. Home is axial. A so-called mobile home is an oxymoron and, I would say, a psychically dangerous thing to live in. As for a writer, something happens that makes one place different from another, makes responses different, makes words different, and for the reader makes responses to those words different. Reading Doig in Mississippi is out of place. So too is reading Faulkner in Seattle.

Granted that imagination bridges space and time. Of course we read Faulkner even though we've never spent a day or year or half a lifetime in Mississippi. But once having given ourselves to the place however briefly, once having strolled through the whispering streets of Oxford, Mississippi, at dusk with the magnolia heavy and the burnished fragments of sunset still violent, we recognize Faulkner and in his words we find our kinship. We

recognize Faulkner's own sense of place and we trust him for it. The point deserves repeating: Assured that a writer has found his or her own sense of place, we trust that writer who by the grace of our own imagination helps us to find our own place.

Another thought before I mention some specific titles: it concerns the issue of whether the Northwest even has a regional literature. Believe it or not, some lingering holdouts here in the Northwest doubt that we do. I take up the subject in a piece I wrote for the Pacific Northwest Quarterly (October 1980) in which I argue that indeed we do. I trace its evolution from early diaries and journals, early novels and poems, to today's best imaginative writers who while celebrating their roots reach a common and universal dimension: for example, poets like William Stafford, Richard Hugo, and best of all Theodore Roethke who says in his poem, "The Right Thing": "God bless the roots.... The right thing happens to the happy man." As one critic (Kermit Vanderbilt) has written, "Roethke and his Northwest had finally come to One." The capital O needs emphasis. Among the informed, the number of holdouts has dwindled to a pathetic few.

But perhaps not so on the national scene and especially on the East coast where the so-called Establishment still thinks of Western literature as a contradiction. It's the old dichotomy of eastern ivy versus western sagebrush, insiders demeaning outsiders, and eastern publishers rejecting Norman Maclean's A River Runs Through It (1976) because he included too many trees! In the recent Columbia Literary History of the United States (1988)—a ponderous, pretentious, pedantic tome—Dartmouth's James M. Cox berates regionalism as a "diminished thing," even suggesting that the nation is but a dialectical region of the English language. According to Cox, language supercedes place,

and literature is chiefly linguistic business. In the same vein another eastern critic (William C. Spengemann) says that what influences writers is neither the geographical region nor the nation but "the present linguistic situation."

Thank goodness for the definitive reply. I refer to the long-awaited A Literary History of the American West (1987), a true heavyweight, its 1408 pages weighing in at nearly five pounds. I recommend it. I call it a mighty book, big like the western skies and the great western canvases of Albert Bierstadt, big like Frank Norris's The Octopus, Ole Rolvaag's Giants in the Earth, John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath, Ken Kesey's Sometimes a Great Notion, and Wallace Stegner's Angle of Repose.

Now to further specifics. This past Spring Quarter my Northwest literature course consisted of fiction written by Northwesterners about the Northwest. Thus I excluded Middle Passage (1990), the National Book Award winner written by my colleague Charles Johnson. I arbitrarily specified the region to include North Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, and Wyoming. I stated my governing theme to be the literal as well as the psychological world of place, the exterior and interior landscape. I used eight books divided into four categories.

The first category, designated as "The Western Mountain Man," highlighted the best mountain-man novel of all, A. B. Guthrie's The Big Sky (1947). Guthrie, a lifelong Montanan, died only this past spring (1991) after a long and distinguished career. With the Rocky Mountains as the novel's setting, Guthrie creates in mythical proportions the mountain man—but always with the shadow of tragedy nearby, a shadow that in the end engulfs the main character, Boone Caudill, and raises the fateful question, "When the Western

myth collapses, what's next?" The other mountain-man novel I used was Don Berry's Trask (1960), placed along the Oregon coast and depicting how Hilbridge Trask, once a mountain man, realizes his tamanawis vision of oneness not only with nature but the Killamook Indian tribe. Berry lives on Vashon Island in Puget Sound.

My second category was "Truth in Toil." I wanted two books depicting hardships and failures in this Western crucible—yet successes in the authors' shaping memories into reality. The first of these two books was Lois Hudson's Reapers of the Dust (1965). Lois is a friend and colleague at the University of Washington, both of us sharing a Depression childhood plus memories of a favorite undergraduate college English professor. Hers is a hard-wrought collection of North Dakota (and Washington) stories—lean, ironic, angry, and poignant. Something of the same tone infuses Doig's This House of Sky (1978), which I also chose. It's a Montana testimony of endurance against the unremitting sense of fate that must in the end triumph.

For the third category, "Death and Taxes," I wanted a novel that opens the dark and tragic world of Native American consciousness. For this purpose I chose James Welch's The Death of Jim Loney (1979), powerful in its delineation of death—the death of an Indian culture, of a vision, of a surrogate love, of home and roots, and finally of Jim Loney himself. The novel is set in northern Montana where Welch traces his ancestory among the Gros Ventres and Blackfeet. The other novel, suggested by "Taxes," is admittedly quirky but nonetheless effective in presenting the economic warfare that marked Northwest history in the early twentieth century, specifically the lumber and sawmill workers represented by their labor unions and, in opposition, the mill owners. Political corruption has no favorites in this novel, The Viewless Winds

(1949, reissued 1990), placed in the logging towns of Aberdeen and Hoquium on Washington's Pacific coast and written by the well-known historian, Murray Morgan of Tacoma.

The fourth and final category, "Outside and In," suggests how the outside or exterior landscape shapes the inner world of the mind and, contrariwise, how the inner mind shapes in a gothic way the outer. The first book, Solace of Open Spaces (1985), is a collection of narrative pieces written by Gretel Ehrlich, a Wyoming sheepherder. The second, set in Idaho, is Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping (1980), a wonderfully eerie tale of two small sisters who, respectively, reject and nurture the imaginative wonderworld symbolized by the mysteriously brooding Lake Coeur d'Alene.

Here, in brief, is a summary of Northwest prose literature, a kaleidoscope of this fructifying region some of us lucky people call home.